

ANALYSIS OF THE THE BEATITUDES IN MATTHEW 5:1-12

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Introduction

Since the 20th century, many methods and discoveries have been used to get the meaning of a particular biblical text. Among these methods are the historical critical methods; for example, the text criticism, the source criticism, the form criticism, the redaction criticism, the tradition criticism and the ideological criticism. All these approaches together with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls essentially, try to analyse the sacred Scriptures in order to uncover the hidden treasure. The analysis of a biblical text is therefore portrayed as a very important step towards a genuine interpretation of this text. It is in that sense that this essay will try to analyse the passage of the Beatitudes in the gospel according to Matthew, precisely in Matthew 5:1-12, thus seeking its correct interpretation. The method used for this analysis will follow four stages. First, a literary context of this passage will be presented. Second, one will see the similarities and differences between Matthew and Luke. The third part will deal with the background of the passage by looking at some primary texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls. At last, other articles, as second literature, will shed more lights on this passage.

Literary Context

Matthew at the beginning of chapter 5 puts before his reader a picture which consists of Jesus seated on a mountain, and teaching his disciples and the crowds who were around him. His teaching might be seen at first as “unrealistic” or a shocking reality, for it is essentially about the blessedness of states that are usually considered by many people as curse. In fact, Jesus is telling his audience that the poor in spirit (Matt 5:3), those who mourn (Matt 5:4), the meek (Matt 5:5), those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6), the merciful (Matt 5:7), those with clean heart (Matt 5:8), the peacemakers (Matt 5:9), the persecuted for the sake of righteousness or for his sake (cf. Matt 5:10-12), are blessed. What does that mean? And to whom is he really talking to? In this passage Matthew

mentioned the disciples and the crowds. To know the more about those crowds, the passage before is helpful.

In the passage before the one of the beatitudes, Jesus is ministering to a great multitude (cf. Matt 4: 23-25), coming ‘from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan (Matt 4: 25). There is also to notice that, this passage of Jesus’ ministry might be seen as a concluding section of the gospel. Hence, a new section begins with the beatitudes. This section is usually called the Sermon on the Mount. The word “sermon” confirms the following passages that are essentially teachings about laws and moral conducts. Consequently, one could see the beatitudes as a kind of introduction to these teachings or a brief summary of what will follow.

The text that follows immediately is the similes of Salt and Light (Matt 5: 13-16). Perhaps, the first significance of the beatitudes might be already seen in this passage, where those that are listening to Jesus are called ‘salt’ and ‘light’ of the earth, called in that way to be example for others (cf. Matt 5:16).

To convey his message, Jesus has repeated many words. There are essentially the words Μακάριοι that is ‘Blessed’ (cf. Matt 5: 3-11), ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν that is ‘the Kingdom of Heaven’ (cf. Matt 5: 3;10), δικαιοσύνην that is ‘righteousness’ (cf. Matt 5: 6;10), and ἐδίωξαν (persecuted) (cf. Matt 5: 11;12). Μακάριοι was used nine times but the other words just mentioned were used twice in different grammatical cases. It is therefore not surprising that this passage is called “beatitudes” a Latin derived word from blessed. Mark Powell said it well when he affirmed that the beatitudes are constituted in a poetic structure; hence it presupposes ‘Matthew’s readers to expect some pattern or consistency’.¹ He continues saying that:

many scholars also contend that Matt 5:3-10 should be subdivided into two stanzas with four lines a piece. Both 5:3-6 and 5:7-10 contain exactly thirty-six words (5:11-12 contains thirty-five), the protases of 5:6 and 5:10 both conclude with the word *dikaioσynē*, and 5:3-6 exhibits internal alliteration through the naming of groups that begin with the letter p: the poor (*ptōchoi*) in spirit, those who mourn (*penthountes*), the meek (*praeis*), and those who hunger (*peinantes*) and thirst for righteousness.

After a careful reading of the Beatitudes, one can notice like Powell that Matthew 5:3-10 and Matthew 5:11-12 are like two different units. In fact, eight beatitudes in vv 3-10 are all addressed in the third person and are held together by the redundant apodoses of the first and last in the series. Verses 11-12, on the other hand, are addressed in the second person and are distinguished from the preceding verses by length, meter, and use of the imperative mood.’ .

This having being presented, it is worth to recognize that this poetic structure is not only seen in the gospel according to Matthew, but also with the gospel of Luke.

Similarities and Differences with the Gospel according to Luke

Among the synoptics, Luke and Matthew are the only ones to talk about the beatitudes. Maybe they took it from their common source Q. As a result, there are similarities in both gospels concerning their beatitudes (Luke 6: 20-26 and Matt 5:1-12). One might observe that ‘both versions of the beatitudes utilize the Greek word, *makarios*, as an introductory word for their sayings. In both Gospels, the beatitudes are addressed to the crowd (Matt. 5:1a; Luke 6:17) with special emphasis on Jesus’ disciples (Matt. 5:1b-2; Luke 6:20a)’. A translation of *makarios* is also given as «Oh the happiness of.»² and it points to ‘the happiness bestowed by God upon the one who lives within the kingdom and receives its blessings’.

Besides these similarities, there are some differences, or some changes that Matthew might have made. These changes express the concern or interest of Matthew.

First, He adds «in spirit» talking about the poor and talks of hungering and thirsting for righteousness, while Luke will refer only to the poor and those who hunger. The reason behind this addition is maybe ‘to spiritualize the understanding of poverty’ but also of hunger.

Second, in the Matthean beatitudes, there are five sayings that are not found in Luke. These include the meek (5:5) the merciful (5:7), the pure in heart (5:8), the peacemakers (5:9) and the persecuted (5:10). Perhaps Matthew uses all these expressions to put emphases on what he said before, especially the state of being poor.

Third, Matthew does not use the adverb of time *nun* (now), whereas

Luke uses it in 6:21. In addition, While Matthew addressed the blessed ones with the third person plural, Luke used the second person. Those two points might suggest the universality of the message of Matthew. That is to say, the beatitudes are not only for those that are listening to Jesus in his time but also for all those from all the nations who will be taught ‘what he has commanded’ (cf. Matt 28:20).

Fourth, Matthew uses the expression ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ (5: 3;10) but Luke talks of ‘kingdom of God’ (6:20). This difference could be explained by the context of the people to whom they were writing to. In fact, some Jews might have preferred avoiding to pronounce the name of God. Matthew might have changed ‘kingdom of God’ to ‘Kingdom of Heaven’. It is in the same line that Thomas Hoyt maybe meant that the difference is ‘the circumlocutionary tendency of the Jews’.

Finally, the beatitudes in Luke (6:24-26) are followed by four woes that are not in Matthew. Matthew might have omitted them since these woes ‘parallel the beatitudes and serve as antitheses to them’. One might say in other words that they are already expressed implicitly in the beatitudes already mentioned.

As Thomas Hoyt mentioned, all the differences concerning the form and the content of the beatitude in both gospels should lead to a critical analysis. And this analysis can begin by discovering different material from the time of the gospel of Matthew. By doing so, one will be able to read the gospel ‘against the background of the time’.³

Background of the Beatitudes

The primary texts for the beatitudes from the Dead sea Scrolls point out that the beatitudes were like a style of writing that existed in the tradition of the Jews. It was a kind of literature, a poetic style used by the Jews to convey a message. Therefore, the beatitudes were not invented by Jesus. Other beatitudes existed. The beatitudes of Enoch serve as illustrations.⁴

The second element to note here is that there are the similarities of certain beatitudes of the time with the ones in Matthew. For example, 2 Enoch B 42: 13 says: ‘Blessed is he in whose mouth is mercy and gentleness’. This beatitude recalls the one of those that are merciful (Matt 5: 7). In that sense, according to Thomas Hoyt the beatitudes in the gospels ‘parallels

Jewish teachings, especially the Pirke Aboth 1:2, and II Enoch 70:11'. Even though it is not sure that 'Jesus was dependent on the Aboth, which is a compilation of sayings from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D.', there is to recognize that 'dependence could have been vice versa'.

The third aspect to highlight after visiting the primary sources is that, most of the beatitudes are about social justice. Nickelsburg and Stone say it clearly as they affirm that 'the beatitudes reflect the same concern for social justice observed in the Sibylline Oracles and the Epistle of Enoch'.

Accordingly, this will lead to say that 'care for the weak and needy in society and a concern for social justice form a sustained theme in the biblical and postbiblical teachings'. It is therefore not surprising to see the beatitudes used in the gospel of Matthew, which might be a contemporary literature with these texts.

Furthermore, not only the beatitudes are met in those biblical or postbiblical literature. There are the "woes". As a matter of fact, 1 Enoch 99: 11-16 tells of woes. These woes serve to point out certain sins that are a kind of 'reverse key to righteousness: avoiding these sins is a way to righteousness.

Moreover, from the Amidah that are Jewish prayers, one might observe that the Jews usually bless God in their prayer for all his deeds. These prayers are a kind of beatitudes, where they bless the Lord and recognize that it is He, who blesses his people Israel. From these ideas, one might assert that in the Matthean Beatitudes, for example 'Blessed are the meek' (Matt 5:5) should be understood as 'Blessed by God are the meek'. Thus, it is possible to say that God has the central role in the beatitudes.

At last, the *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of the Deuteronomy*, shows that all are called to imitate God who is the merciful and the righteous. Reuven Hammer translated it well when he wrote: 'As God is called righteous, *For the Lord is righteous, He loveth righteousness* (Ps. 11:7), so you too should be righteous. As God is called merciful, as it is said *For I am merciful* [...] so too should you be merciful'.⁵ From the background discovered how then scholars interpret the passage of the beatitudes?

Lights from Secondary Literature

The article of Domeris W.R. “Exegesis and Proclamation. “Blessed are You...” (Matthew 5:1-12)” serves here as the principal second literature meant to shed light on the Matthean Beatitudes. According to Domeris, concerning the Beatitudes, there is a ‘the tendency among preachers and teachers to emphasize their «spiritual» meaning at the expense of their literal intention as the opening proclamations of Jesus’ teaching on the Reign of God’. The beatitudes are instead ‘designed to be the reverse -statements which shock the readers/hearers by their radical challenge to the contemporary religio-political situation. It is in that sense very important to interpret the beatitudes from their context. In fact, one should know that the Sadducees or Pharisees believed that the

first in the kingdom of God would be the educated, the priests and teachers of the law (all males and middle to upper-class). The last in the kingdom would consequently be the poor and often oppressed «people of the land,» along with women and gentiles.

Accordingly, the beatitudes in Matthew constitute an answer or a response of Jesus to such teaching. That is why Jesus ‘proclaims the revolutionary nature of the Reign of God, which turns human standards upside-down’.

Coming to the meaning of each beatitude, Domeris precised that there are not supposed to be understood only in a spiritual sense, as there were traditionally understood; rather each of the beatitudes should also be taken in its literal sense. Hence, the poor in spirit of Matthew implies someone who ‘is both poor and lacking in spirit, that is, one who has been robbed of one’s material means and of one’s dignity. He puts it well as he describes the poor in spirit as ‘a collection of poor people, eyes dull with lack of emotion; people that are ‘poor and without spirit’ and thus ‘are the tired victims of a cruel society’. The same idea applies for all the beatitudes. With verse 4 of Matthew 5 for example, that says «Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted», it is not only a ««spiritual» sense of mourning for one’s sins’. Here, it is instead talking about “real mourners of real deaths” who will be comforted by God for that reason.

Another example is the case of the meek. Traditionally it implies to be humble or self-effacing. However, in putting this sentence in its context one

remembers that ‘here Jesus is quoting scripture, namely Psalm 37:1. And that, ‘the Hebrew term used in the Psalm is *oni* and is one of the Hebrew words for the literal poor or oppressed’. As a result, the meek are literally the poor and oppressed.

Following this way of thinking, Domeris paraphrased the first four beatitudes as follows:

Blessed by God are those who are poor and stripped even of their spirit, for they will possess God’s kingdom. Blessed by God are those for whom brutal death is a constant companion for God shall comfort them. Blessed by God are those who have been oppressed, for they shall inherit God’s land. Blessed by God are those who hunger and thirst because there is no justice, for they will find justice.

This article of Domeris brings new light in the analysis of the beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew, for it helps to consider the literal meaning of the beatitudes that are most of the time neglected.

Domeris might be right when he invites the interpreter or the preacher about the beatitudes to consider both the literal and the spiritual meaning. In fact, the definition of the term poverty is not only about a spiritual aspect but a material aspect has to be considered as well. In that sense, Rosenfeld defines a poor man as ‘someone who is in need for something. Hence, ‘If he has everything he needs, he is not poor’. Moreover, with Francis Oborji, the Evangelical poverty is linked with ‘the imitation of Jesus Christ who has freely come to deliver us from sin, from hatred, from death, and from our physical, moral and spiritual miseries’. Consequently, the ‘Evangelical poverty belongs to the reign of the beatitudes: «One must leave everything to follow Jesus Christ.⁶

Like Domeris, Francis Oborji goes on to explain that one must not understand the beatitudes in the sense that those who will enter the kingdom of Heaven are only the poor. He expresses it by saying that:

not only the poor enter the kingdom of heaven, but even the poor; it is an implicit response to the haughtiness of the Pharisees.’ A similar response to the Pharisees lies in Jesus’ employment of Isaiah 61:1 (Matt. 11:5; Luke 4:18) to announce the messianic character of his mission; the good news is brought to the poor, who are not excluded from the kingdom .

Conclusion

At the end of this essay, one can point out that the analysis of the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, has led to discover that a genuine interpretation of this text should pay attention to the fact that the beatitudes were like a style of writing that existed in the tradition of the Jews even before Jesus. And that these texts that is to say the biblical and postbiblical teachings of this time, were generally about social justice. The poor and the needy were people to take care of. Hence, the beatitudes are not to be interpreted as having only spiritual meaning but also the literal meaning is to consider. The concern of Matthew was to show those who will inherit the kingdom of Heaven. Thus, he mentioned implicitly by this passage of the beatitudes that all people are called to enter Heaven; both poor and rich are called, depending on their openness to depend on God. These beatitudes constitute therefore a teaching for all believers to depend on God and to imitate him, in order to become for the world true examples, true ‘salt and light of the world’(cf. Matt 5: 13-16).

¹ Powell, Mark Allan. “*Matthew’s Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom*”.
The Catholic Biblical Quarterly. 58 (1996) 460-479.

² Hoyt, Thomas. “*The Poor/Rich. Theme in the Beatitudes*” Journal of Religious Thought.
31-41.

³ Domeris, W.R. “*Exegesis and Proclamation. “Blessed are you...” (Matthew 5:1-12)*”
Journal of Theology for Southern Africa. 67-76.

⁴ Nickelsburg and Michael E.Stone, *Early Judaism. Text and Documents on Faith and Piety*. Revised Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

⁵ Sifre. *A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of the Deuteronomy*. Trans. Reuven Hammar,
New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁶ Oborji, Francis Anekwe. “*Poverty and the Mission-Charity Trend. A perspective from Matthew.*” International Review of Mission vol XCI. No. 360. 87-101.